

Watching Trent Jones figure out who killed 20G is as good as sweating your way through a triple overtime thriller in which your team wins.

— Will Blythe, author of *To Hate Like This Is To Be Happy Forever*

Who Killed 20G?

by

Mark Phialas



A Trent Jones Novel



Praise for
WHO KILLED 20G?

“Sam Spade, Mike Hammer, Travis McGee, and Phillip Marlowe: sure, these guys ain’t bad when it comes to solving a crime, but what do they know about college basketball?”

In Trent Jones, the hero of *WHO KILLED 20G?*, Mark Phialas has turned loose a charming Southerner with an occasional knack for gambling, sporadic luck with the ladies, and an inevitable habit of getting hit on the head...He can take a shot and give them out. I wouldn’t trust him with my girl. But I like his rooting interest in college basketball...Watching him figure out who killed 20G is as good as sweating your way through a triple overtime thriller in which your team wins.”

— Will Blythe, author of
To Hate Like This Is To Be Happy Forever

“Trent Jones embraces his human foibles and makes his way as honestly as he can, one foot in front of the next, in a world both beautifully flawed and painfully hopeful. He is the modern, lost man whose affections are deep, even if we can’t see them clearly. His morality, like his loves and his hates, is home-made on the fly, and is very moving. He is no saint, but I blame the churches for that, not him.”

— Jay Anania, screenwriter and film director

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CHAPTER ONE

My smug rival launched a soaring two-iron second shot that flew long and true toward the flagstick on the sixteenth green. The ball landed as softly as a damp sock within inches of the hole, and it was all over but the pouting at Resurrection Bay Golf Club.

I applauded the quintessential tap-in eagle, mostly because it had been unnecessary. A birdie would have ended the match on that uphill par five, but that would have been dull...for His Smugness.

I took the remaining hundred-dollar bills out of my wallet and waited by my cart. Three days of poor decisions on the card table, too much scotch, and not many birdies painted a harsh self-portrait. I suppose I could have just handed Randy Andrews my \$5,000 when I first met him, but why spoil the fun? Grover R. Andrews, to be precise. He'd flown from Seattle into Jacksonville, Florida, for a few days of match play on Fleming Island with Seven-Stud as a chaser. He'd be returning west with nearly \$4,700, and most of my self-respect.

Andrews appeared to be in his late thirties and even in a strong wind, each hair on his puffed-up head stayed in place, as if shellacked. I thought he sucked in his cheeks to project a lean and hungry look and maybe tone down his smirk.

"That was a nice one, wasn't it, Jones?" Andrews said when he grabbed the bills in my hand. "Not your day, is it?"

Andrews strutted to *his* cart and drove to the green to retrieve his golf ball. I didn't move. I sat in *my* cart and waited for that pest to disappear, but he wasn't about to leave the stage without a curtain call.

Andrews retrieved his ball, turned toward me two hundred yards away, and took a long bow. When Andrews waved as he marched off the putting surface, I imagined a mammoth bird of prey swooping down and hauling him to its carnivorous nest.

Oddly enough, the sky remained vacant of famished winged

creatures. Reality demanded stronger measures, and I chose a reliable soothing mechanism, my flask of Johnny Walker. I drained the final drops, and that meant the time had come to return to the parking lot, pack up the clubs, restock the flask, and figure out what to do with the three hundred bucks that were still mine.

I pressed the cart's accelerator, but nothing happened. I switched the lever back and forth from forward to reverse. Sometimes those controls would stick. Not this time. The battery had died. Perfect. Maybe the girl in the beverage cart would come by. I could use a ride and a cold one.

I unstrapped my golf bag from the cart and started walking up the long hill in front of me on a hot, muggy, late-March afternoon. Sweat soon poured out of me and gushed into my eyes. I used my North Carolina Tar Heels golf towel to dry off and resumed the journey to the parking lot.

Twenty-five minutes later I stood in front of my black Prelude, which I'd left in the first row near the clubhouse. My shirt was drenched, and I needed air conditioning. I put the golf bag down and groped for the car keys in my shorts. I found nothing but golf tees and change, and while fighting off the first phase of panic, I checked all of the pockets in the golf bag, but the keys weren't there, either. Sweat burned my eyes again, and for good measure, I bit my tongue. Within moments, the flavor of stale penny invaded my mouth, while my tongue throbbed and continued to trickle blood.

For a dark moment I feared I'd lost the keys somewhere on the golf course. The drama in my mouth distracted me from the panic button that I could have easily pushed in less painful circumstances. It felt like I'd bitten my tongue in half. To view the damage, I used the driver's side window as a mirror and glanced at the dashboard.

The car keys were still in the ignition. What a nuisance – but not a problem. I carry a small pin that can be used to pick most locks. Doors. Handcuffs. Cars. A friend of mine in New York City taught me a variety of emergency skills, and though I'd been skeptical at the time, those lessons have saved me time and money. I pushed the pin into the lock on the driver's side door as Andrews came out of the snack bar.

“Boosting a car, Jones?” Andrews snickered as he walked toward

me. "It's not your week. You could at least choose a car from this century." He waved a business card at me and stuck it in the top pouch of my golf bag. "Call me any time for a rematch."

Can't say I'd turn that opportunity down. Andrews had rented a gold Cadillac, and he made sure I noticed him one final time before he left Resurrection Bay.

It took me just a few seconds to unlock the door and pop the hood. I looked into the radiator, and it was low. This had been a problem the last 100,000 miles. Okay, it was an old car. But I loved it. Couldn't afford to change. So I kept a five-gallon gas can full of water to keep filling the radiator, which needed fluid every two or three thousand miles. I poured in some water and wished I had a cold bottle for me.

I put the clubs in the trunk and looked for a fifth of Johnny Walker, which I found, but for some reason, it was bone dry. A lightning bolt of clarity hit me. If you're the only one playing Indian Poker, by the time you look in the mirror, it's too late.

* * *

Dread ruled the first hundred miles as I drove north on I-95. One universal trump card remained at my disposal, but there was a rub. I'd relied on this bailout too many times already. It was worse than calling family because I needed a favor from my closest friend. Again.

To brace myself for the journey and next conversation, I bought a six-pack of beer near the Florida line. Three Buds later, I called Frank in New York on my cell when I approached Savannah. His secretary put me on hold, and a few miles passed before he came on the line.

"What happened?" Frank asked. "How much did you lose? Are you sober?"

My silence said it best.

"Damn it," Frank said. "You blew it all in a week. Don't you get sick of that shit?"

"Can't blame you a bit."

"My fault," Frank insisted. "I arranged that missing daughter case for you. It was a snap, right?"

"Found her in St. Augustine," I said. "Her mother gave me a bonus. One thing led to another."

“So *cash* is the problem? Where are you?”

“Just passed Savannah.”

“Okay. That’s what you need to hear, right? You can stay at Tranquility.”

He hung up before I could say thanks, and he had every right to be pissed. A couple of weeks ago I’d tapped out and called Frank from Orlando. I’d wanted to borrow a couple of hundred bucks, but Frank had found a better answer. One of his entertainment industry clients lived in Jacksonville with a fifteen-year-old daughter who craved Harleys, older guys with tattoos, and tequila. Frank’s client didn’t want to go to the cops, and that led to my being hired. I’m not licensed. But no one wanted an ID or badge for a discreet operation. I don’t look for this kind of work. But if Frank arranged a job, I’d do it. Frank’s jobs were compensated with cash at the discreet rate, meaning that you *paid* for quiet.

It took three days. I found her in a Motel 6 with a bag of opium and a fifty-year-old greasy-haired biker with prison tats and a sour disposition when I left him on the bathroom floor. I hauled the kid to my car and drove her home. Her mother was a piece of work, too, but she took out of a drawer a stack of hundreds that briefly came into my acquaintance before heading west to Seattle.

Easy come, and easier go.

That was one of the reasons Frank and I never quite stayed in sync. He had turned a law degree and cat burglar’s instincts into a lucrative career as a sports and entertainment agent. Me? I liked to go with the flow on a card table or a golf course. I preferred an easy pace, while Frank thrived in the fastest lane in New York City. But from time to time, Frank recharged his batteries at his vacation retreat in Tranquility, a gated golf community just past Georgetown and south of the madness that defined Myrtle Beach. We’d enjoyed some great times at TQ, as the members say, but not lately.

It had been almost six months since I’d seen the huge swamp that served as the north border to the Tranquility compound. There was only one gate into the community, which was protected by electric fencing on its west and south sides, while the Atlantic Ocean took care of the east. Once you passed through the gate, you drove for almost two miles

before you saw the first residence.

I popped the top on the fourth beer and wondered how far I could drive before needing to piss.

* * *

The rain picked up when I passed Georgetown on U.S. 17, and I almost missed the right-hand turn into Tranquility. When I pulled into the visitor's side of the gate, a chunky security guard with puffy cheeks and piglet nose trudged toward my vehicle in his rain slicker. He flashed me a hard look, and his tiny, darting eyes and stubby fingers made me think of Ancient Age, barbecue, and good old boys gone wrong.

"Name?" His tone served as a warning.

"I'm visiting Frank Williams."

"Name?"

"Trent Jones."

"Frank Williams is in New York," the guard said. "He told our staff that he wouldn't be coming back to Tranquility until next month."

"I'm house sitting."

The guard grunted and hauled his 280 pounds of flab into the gatehouse and returned with a cell phone. He dialed in front of me, and it was odd that Frank picked up. Did this swine have Frank's cell number?

"Mr. Williams? This is Barney Johnson with Tranquility Security. Sorry to bother you. I have Trent Jones here, who claims he's house sitting for you."

Barney paused a few seconds. "You did? I must have missed it on the list. Yes, I'll do that. Sorry for the bother." He snapped the cell shut, and it took a couple of moments before Barney looked back at me.

"Must be hard to keep up with the Joneses these days," I said.

"I work two jobs, Ace," Barney snapped. "I'm also a deputy with the Georgetown Sheriff's Department. Have you been drinking? On second thought, open your trunk."

"What?"

"Do it."

So I went out in the rain, which picked up again, and unlocked the trunk. Barney brushed me aside and shifted my clubs and dirty clothes

to find the empty bottle of Johnny Walker Black. He thrashed around for several more minutes and gave up.

“What did you expect?” I slammed the trunk shut. “Heroin?”

Barney looked into the Prelude. “I’m giving you a break on those beer cans. Keep it under twenty-five, Ace. We have lots of folks on bikes here.”

Meanwhile, a black limo pulled up to the automatic gate for members. I glanced through an open window in time to see someone I recognized from ESPN. It was Wellington University head basketball coach Kenny Kincaid, known in some circles as 20G. Kincaid smoked a cigar and yapped at someone in the backseat whose face I couldn’t see. I thought about the \$500 I’d lost on Wellington last week in the NCAA tournament and wanted to yell, “You suck.”

Tranquility seemed tame for 20G, who had been known to put serious weight on a horse at Saratoga, spend sixty hours straight at a casino table, or maybe hand an AAU coach a wad of hundreds. There were scads of rumors about 20G, and while nothing had ever been proven, it was the thought that counted. In my view 20G earned his nickname honestly because it was tough to say who should have been more interested in him: the NCAA or the IRS. And if it turned into a race, 20G would place a bet.

The limo driver flashed a card in front of the scanner that opened the members’ gate, and as the stretch eased into the property, Barney’s shoulders sagged. He watched the vehicle disappear from view as it headed down Fox Meadow Drive to the heart of the Tranquility community. After a two-mile straightaway, Fox Meadow Drive turned into a huge circle inside the compound, and it connected with every side street. There was one way in and one way out.

I wondered if 20G had come to Tranquility because of the Seven-Stud game in The Snead Room, one of the entertainment centers in the massive clubhouse that served as host for Tranquility dining and diversions, as well as providing a pro shop and spacious locker rooms.

Barney’s porcine fingers waved me through the gate, and I drove into TQ with a sense of impending comfort. But that feeling of coming home didn’t last. A burgundy and gold helicopter flew low to the trees and headed toward Tranquility’s landing pad, snapping the momentary

spell.

The limo reappeared, and I slowed down to watch as it angled into the landing pad parking lot. Kenny Kincaid and a blonde woman stepped out in the rain with umbrellas to greet two men, one of them quite tall, when they climbed out of the helicopter with the name *Air G* on the side that faced me. Another man came out of the chopper and scurried to the limo with two small suitcases, which he stuffed in the trunk. I noticed two more women in the limo when the doors opened, and everyone climbed in. The limo followed the circular path back onto Fox Meadow Drive and glided away.

As the limo disappeared around a curve and into a grove of Spanish moss and pines, the sounds of gulls clacked in the distance. I caught a whiff of the ocean and felt serene, as if I'd earned my way into that community and belonged. But that changed when I turned off Fox Meadow and onto Francis Marion Avenue, and a Tranquility patrol car put its nose on the back of my Prelude.

I looked back and recognized Barney just before the blue light flashed. I stepped out again in the rain. He did, too.

"I told you to go twenty-five," Barney said, holding a clipboard close to his chest, trying to keep it dry.

"What was I doing?"

"Thirty."

"It's a crime wave."

Barney moved closer and said, "License."

I took out my wallet and handed Barney my North Carolina driver's license. When the rain fell harder, I retreated to my car, while Barney went to his vehicle to begin the paperwork. It took almost five minutes before Barney plodded back to my car. I waited an extra beat and lowered the window, which was juvenile but fun to do.

"This is a Georgetown County Sheriff's Department citation," Barney said as he tore off my copy. "Remember. Obey all traffic signs and speeds in this complex."

"No trial?"

Barney grunted, more of a snort this time. "I hope to see you again soon."

"Me, too."

Barney returned to his patrol car and turned off the spinning blue light. He tossed me an icy glance and drove away.

* * *

Most houses at Tranquility face the ocean, regardless of the lot's location or its proximity to the water. This means that the front of some homes, so that they look toward the Atlantic, can't be seen from the road. The first time I saw Frank's three-story home on Francis Marion Avenue, I thought it had turned its back on me. And when I had followed the driveway around to the three-car garage, I'd discovered that the back of the house was the front and vice versa. Most Tranquility homes had *front* doors on both sides of the house, a quirk that Frank loved.

Frank said he'd picked a raised Florida Beach design because of the tropical themes that enhanced the shape of the exterior, the three picture windows on the main floor, and the two screened-in porches.

Inside, there were four huge bedrooms, each with its own flat screen TV. The living room featured two of the picture windows that faced the third green and fourth tee, while there were photos in the dining room of Ben Hogan hitting that one-iron in the 1950 U.S. Open at Merion, and Jack Nicklaus making the birdie putt on the seventeenth hole at the 1986 Masters. There was a large kitchen with an island gas range, and you'd find a monster widescreen in the living room with DVR and Direct TV.

My favorite room was Frank's den, where signed photographs of Arnie, Jack, and Tiger were displayed on one wall, and Entertainment Tonight stars on the other. You've heard these people sing and watched them in films. There was a signed photo of an Academy Award winner in the right corner of the den that claimed a place of tribute above a Butler Fossil Stone Game Table. The actress knew the owner of the company, and for one of Frank's birthdays, a solid mahogany chess table with fossil stone top, as well as rosewood hand-carved chess pieces, had arrived in time for the party that summer at Tranquility. When Frank learned that it had a drawer that opened when you tapped the side of the table, he looked like a ten-year-old. That was right up Frank's alley.

Several young ladies had stayed with Frank – including that actress

– in his apartment on the East Side or down at TQ. He'd never married, but that was not to say he never came close. It was odd that I hadn't heard any tales of late nights with intriguing strangers in the past couple of months. Maybe he'd met someone worth seeing more than a few times, which would be out of his pattern. Maybe he wanted to keep it quiet until the bloom of the latest rose faded. I didn't think he ever wanted to get too close for very long, but who was I to talk?

I found the house key under the left foot of the statue that stood on the side of the house facing the fourth tee. It was supposed to be a golfer, and it was, sort of. Frank said he wanted something with character, something distinctive. I wasn't sure where he'd found a bronze monstrosity that looked like E.T. with a Titleist visor. Most people would have put the statue where visitors would be more apt to see it when they stopped by, but not Frank.

Frank's den featured a bar with a mini fridge, icemaker, a case of Lagavulin, and a mammoth leather armchair that had been a gift from an NBC producer. It wasn't long before I'd eased into the most comfortable spot in the house with a movie theater-sized Jeff Gordon drinking cup full of single malt and maybe four ice cubes.

The phone rang, and happily, I reached it without having to move. Of course it was Frank, and he went right to the point. "Let me guess. You're already hitting the scotch. Do yourself a favor – go easy. I don't mind if you drink it all, but for your own sake, take a break."

I heard a twinge of something I couldn't gauge. "What's up with you?"

Frank coughed. "It's been a busy stretch. I'm working on a couple of things that won't come together."

"Why don't you pack it in and get down here? We play golf in the afternoon. Watch the NCAA tournament at night. Maybe play a few hands."

"That sounds perfect," Frank said. "I just can't put this stuff down now. I mean it about taking it easy. I'm worried about you. Call it a night early for a change."

My face felt warmer. "I'm doing okay."

"Think about it." And the line went dead.

I poured a fresh drink. Then I had another, which I took with me

to the Prelude, and drove to The Snead Room. Sometimes I can't stay away from a card game. To be honest, I can't stay away from scotch, either.

* * *

I found a spot in the parking lot and walked up the driveway and into the clubhouse. Took a left into the bar, where members and guests of all ages were getting primed for a night of college basketball. Most of the focus in the room pointed toward 20G, who wore one of his trademark three-piece suits that had cost several thousand dollars. The Armani charcoal gray with a tiny white pinstripe, off-white dress shirt, and burgundy-accented tie reminded me of the suits that the character Gordon Gekko wore in the film *Wall Street*. Gangster also crossed my mind, but that was probably because I hadn't resolved my bitterness about the NCAA bet I'd lost.

20G still retained the look of a man in his early forties, but that was courtesy of facelifts and expensive haircuts. ESPN analysts insisted that his dark hair, bright blue eyes, perfect features, and passion for basketball radiated timeless Hollywood charisma. But in truth, 20G had raced in the fast lanes too long, and the first sign that he was running out of road had been his ineffective coaching in critical games that past season. He needed a big year and didn't get it. And like I said, he cost me five hundred bucks.

There were two men sitting with 20G at a table that was stacked with beer bottles. Each man held a shot glass, and they passed around a fifth of what looked like tequila. The man on 20G's left might have been in his late thirties, or maybe he looked that young because he was tan, very fit, and wore an even more expensive suit than the coach. The third man, really a kid with a Boston Red Sox baseball cap on backwards, wore tan shorts with a lime golf shirt.

20G drained his beer chaser and shouted at the bartender, "Can we get another round of Miller?"

The bartender nodded and put three bottles of High Life on a tray, which he delivered himself. There wasn't a waitress, which surprised me because the NCAA Tournament games would start soon.

I moved to an open spot at the bar. "You still have Lagavulin?"

The bartender snagged a bottle of the good stuff from the top shelf. “How do you want it?”

“Double. One cube of ice.”

“You a member? Haven’t seen you before.”

“Guest. Put it on Frank Williams’ tab.”

The bartender smiled. “Should have known. He drinks the same brand.”

My buzz built momentum in the next hour, and I lost track of how many drinks I’d put on Frank’s tab. I tried to avoid staring at the well-known basketball coach across the room. After all, famous people are just like us. Aren’t they?

The next time I glanced 20G’s way, three young women had joined his party. They knocked back shots, too. When the kid in the baseball cap stood up to pour another round, I was surprised that he was almost seven feet tall. Maybe he’d played some ball somewhere.

The atmosphere grew more and more festive. Most of the tables were full, and there was now a crowd at the bar. In fact, two gorgeous women were close enough to smell, and they smelled damn good.

I tried smiling at them, but they had too much sense to acknowledge a guy getting hammered alone in a crowded room. I sucked what was left of my current ice cube and thought I heard a Rolling Stones song.

“Can we turn that up?” I suggested to the bartender when he walked by.

“Wish I could,” the bartender said. “Club rules. We’re at the max now.”

“Why play it if you can’t hear it?”

The bartender moved to fill another order, and I must have stood up too fast because I slipped and fell. Laughter came from the direction of 20G’s table.

I caught the bartender’s eye. “Going to The Snead Room. Can I get a double to go?”

He sighed, “Okay. But this will have to be it.”

I grabbed my traveler and realized I needed to hit the men’s room. I meandered down the hall, and the door opened as I reached for it. 20G came out, almost colliding with me.

I dodged him and said, “You cost me half a grand.”

20G ignored me and put a small vial back in his coat pocket. He sniffed a couple of times and walked away. Three guesses what was in the vial.

Come to think of it, a couple of lines wouldn't hurt. But the men's room was empty, and moments later, I swerved out to the hall and took a left into The Snead Room. There were six men and a dealer at a table with eight chairs. A stunning woman with blonde hair in her late teens/early twenties sipped a Corona, holding the back of the empty chair. She might have been the same woman I'd seen at the helicopter-landing pad with 20G; I couldn't say for sure. She wore a Wellington tank top that didn't reach the top of her tight shorts, so that her perfect abs and a cactus tattoo near her navel could be seen, and perhaps admired. I admit giving the artwork a second glance.

"Room for one more?" I asked. I shot the girl a grin, but she ignored it. In fact, no one at the table acknowledged my presence. I asked again, just as 20G hurried into the room, brushed past the blonde goddess, and took the last open chair.

"Kenny Kincaid. Basketball genius," I said. "You are Kenny, right?"

He ignored me, so I moved closer to him.

"What brings you to Tranquility?"

"Do I know you?" 20G asked in a cold tone. He looked at me with wild, distracted eyes. I shook my head.

"Then why don't you leave me the fuck alone?"

"Harmless question," I said.

"I'm here to get lucky. Is that what you want to know?"

I sipped my drink and watched the game. 20G hunched over his cards, while the goddess held onto his chair and leaned her body so that her breasts brushed 20G's face. Her right hand rubbed his neck and moved slowly down to rest on his shoulder, almost as if she were protecting him.

20G paid her little mind. He was too busy chasing that luck.

After a series of big bets and losses, 20G abruptly rose from the table, just as I moved behind him. He bumped into me, and as I was about to apologize, he shoved me hard with both hands.

But that wasn't enough. 20G pushed me again. "Get the fuck out

of my way.”

He started to walk away, but turned and threw a punch that grazed my left forehead. I shifted my weight and hit him hard with my right hand. 20G clutched my shirt as I grabbed his arms, and we staggered into the table, knocking glasses and chips onto the floor.

By now, 20G had his hands on my throat, and I tried to push him off of me. When he started panting, he had to pause to catch his breath. I thought a coach would be in better shape, but then again, management rarely worked as hard as labor. What a scene. We were a couple of drunks knocking the shit out of each other for no reason. Frank would have been proud.

When we separated, 20G threw a wild punch, and I landed a hard right that flattened his nose and hurt my hand.

“Do something. Fuck this asshole up,” 20G barked with blood trickling down the left side of his face.

Two players at the table grabbed me, and one of them hit me from behind. I shook loose and shoved the guy who had hit me. I punched him twice and was about to add to the total when Barney and a member of the Georgetown County Sheriff’s Department raced into the room.

The deputy, who matched Barney in size, had already sweated through his tan shirt with a red and black GCSD patch over the left front pocket. He pulled his nightstick and tried to put a large dent in my head, but I ducked under the blow. The deputy lost his balance long enough to give me an opening, and I gave him my Sunday best – a stinging jab that spun him around, making his legs wobble. I turned and went after Barney, but someone hit me with a bottle or a hammer, I didn’t know which. I fell to the floor and felt a sharp pain in my side after someone kicked me. I tried to roll, but at least three sets of hands held me in place, while Barney grunted and cuffed me.

At that point everyone involved was breathing hard. They hauled me to my feet, and Barney and the deputy led me out of the room.

“Is he staying here?” the deputy asked as we went down the hall past the line in front of the men’s room.

“Yeah,” Barney said. “We’ll take him in my car.”

We lurched outside, and they shoved me into the back of a patrol car. Blue lights flashed, and we spun away from the clubhouse. I heard

Barney mumbling on his cell phone, asking what to do with me. He laughed and snapped his phone shut just about the moment darkness beckoned. I tried to keep my eyes open, wondering where they were taking me, curious about what was so amusing.

The weight of the evening pulled at me, and I fought that gravity as long as I could before sinking into the darkness like a hot coal in soft snow.